Soldier Diaries: Confronting the Trauma of War

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Wars are among the most poignant events in human history. Just as they lead to the rise and fall of nations, they shape individual lives in profound ways. Wars also provide a window into human nature: though they can bring out the best in people as seen in episodes of selfless heroism, they inevitably unleash the worst—hatred, savagery, tribalism, wrath. It is for all of these reasons that I devote significant time in my history classes to the examination of war on multiple levels. Some of my favorite objects from history that shed light on the experience of war for ordinary people are soldier diaries. When teaching World War I, I have my students read diaries from three men—Elmer Straub, Eugene Kennedy, and John Trible—published in the text *Going to the Source.* It was due to these objects that I learned the horrible extent to which wars have impacted my students. The episode I will recount below involving the diaries was one of the most difficult moments I have ever faced in the classroom. Through the experience I learned to be unafraid of strong emotions, and it made me understand the importance of creating safe spaces for students to let their guards down and make true connections with the past.

It was 2015, and I was teaching at Eastern Connecticut State University. My lessons about World War I have typically not produced strong reactions among my students; I attributed this to the fact that it happened a century ago, that it seems so distant to them. Today, many Americans have a similar relationship to the conflicts that the country is currently engaged in. It is almost as easy to forget that soldiers are still presently fighting in Afghanistan as it is to overlook the fact the over one hundred thousand Americans perished in the "war to end all wars." On this day in 2015, however, I had a student in my class who was vividly aware of what was happening halfway across the globe because he came from Iraq. To him, war was not a distant abstraction, it was an ongoing nightmare.

The discussion started out sedate. After asking what topics appeared the most in the diaries (the men wrote almost constantly about food and the weather), I asked if the soldiers seemed to be aware of their government's stated reasons for fighting. The students were particularly curious about the fact that the specific war aims almost never came up in the diaries: how could this be when men are risking their lives? Wouldn't a man want to believe that he is fighting for something larger, something important, wondered a student? Another posited that the men probably just wanted to get out alive, and that focusing on the mundane was most likely a way of coping with the constant threat of death. To this, my student from Iraq responded: "why did they not care? Always, they do not care." He expressed dismay at the fact that people don't think about the consequences of war, that they just go along with it, doing as they are told.

As the discussion continued, my Iraqi student grew increasingly emotional. At a certain point he could not hold himself back, exclaiming "people in Iraq are dying, and nobody questions this!" What another student said

next shocked me: he shouted, “they hit us first! We had to hit them back!” My Iraqi student shot back that Iraq had not been involved in 9/11, leading to more back and forth as others joined in, their voices growing louder and angrier. It was one of the only times in my classroom when I felt that there was a chance of violence erupting due to the sheer intensity of the emotion in the room. As soon as I found an opening, I stepped in and got the students to stop shouting at each other. I then implored my class to treat each other as individuals and to remember that they were all part of the larger campus community; I hope that I was able to do something to get my students to look beyond the poisonous tribalism of us and them (or in this case, us and him), though I am not sure how effective I was. At that point, a big part of me wanted to simply bring the discussion back to World War I and avoid the discomfort of engaging with the strong feelings that had been unleashed, but I took a chance, realizing that if history was to be relevant for my students, I had to let them follow the thread wherever it led them.

I wish I could say that what ensued was a brilliant teachable moment; I guess I did the best I could under the circumstances. I encouraged students to speak their minds if there was anything left unsaid from the discussion beforehand. A few offered additional thoughts, but most wanted to move on. I then steered the discussion into a consideration of the morality of war, asking questions such as when is war acceptable, when it is not, and what ethical responsibilities average citizens bear when their government chooses to fight. There are many reasons to support the contention that my lesson was a success. Notably, my students made an emotional connection to people and events that happened nearly a century ago. They also had an opportunity to let out the very intense feelings that they had about current events, and I can only hope that they learned something about human nature and tribalism.

I have always believed that one of the best reasons for the study of history is that it provides students with an opportunity to discuss current issues in a context somewhat removed from the present, making it more likely that they will let down the barriers they have erected to shield their true feelings. The experience of my students working with the diaries of Elmer Straub, Eugene Kennedy, and John Trible vividly demonstrate this. Although I led my students through a difficult, uncomfortable place, bringing light to the unilluminated spaces of our beings is perhaps the first step toward change for the better. As disquieting as it was to experience what I did, teachers should embrace moments like these, to not be afraid to confront the darker angels of our nature.